

**The Mentoring/Professional Conversation project
for teachers supporting Learning Assistance,
Special Education, and ESL
in School District #68, Nanaimo-Ladysmith**

**A joint project of the
British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF),
Nanaimo and District Teachers' Association (NDTA),
and School District # 68, Nanaimo-Ladysmith**

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Background

In the 2002–03 school year the B.C. Teachers’ Federation (BCTF), with the support of provincial specialist associations (PSAs), conducted a research project that included a consideration of “The challenge of specialist support teachers – Learning Assistance, English as a Second Language, and Special Education – in multiple roles.”¹ Researchers examined the provision of services in Learning Assistance, English as a Second Language (ESL), and Special Education in two school districts, Nanaimo and Coquitlam, and found significant reductions in levels of service. Reduction of staffing in these specialist areas was found to be much higher than in the general teaching population. Combining roles into one “job” was found to be a direct result of the “disproportionate cuts to the numbers of Specialist Support Teachers.” In addition, the service-delivery model in Nanaimo was changed to a school-based one, resulting in major changes in work patterns for Specialist Support Teachers. The changes to multiple roles and school-based service delivery resulted in significant challenges for specialist teachers to meet student needs. Researchers felt the results found in Nanaimo and Coquitlam were typical of districts throughout the province.

Following this, School District 68 sponsored an independent study into Student Support Services (SSS), resulting in a number of recommendations. The subsequent action plan led to the district’s involvement in this joint project with the BCTF and the Nanaimo and District Teachers’ Association (NDTA).

In an effort to provide professional support for inclusive education, the BCTF is involved in a number of research projects around the province. One of these projects is to explore the effectiveness of Professional Discussion Groups and Teacher Inquiry Groups as means of supporting teachers’ professional development. Because Nanaimo and Coquitlam had been involved in the 2002–03 research project into multiple roles for Specialist Support Teachers, they were invited, along with a northern district, Prince George, to participate in this project. It was felt that the project would stand a better chance of success if supported by all parties: School District 68, the NDTA, and the BCTF. Financial and other supports were provided by all three groups.

During the 2004–05 school year, mentoring/professional conversation groups were conducted in Nanaimo, Coquitlam, and Prince George for teachers working in new or unfamiliar positions providing Special Education, Learning Assistance, or ESL services. In Nanaimo, there were two additional groups: one was a book study group that explored new and inclusive teaching approaches outlined in an on-line book on Universal Design for Learning²; the other group explored the Individual Education Plan (IEP) as a living document, considering how to make the IEP more useful to classroom teachers.

As part of the implementation plan³ for the Student Support Services Review⁴, the district hoped to “examine the role of the school-based support service teacher, to reduce the demands of paperwork, and to give added emphasis to the instructional and educational leadership inherent in this position.” Thus there was a convergence between the district’s

¹ <http://www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/challenge/>

² <http://www.cast.org/teachingeverystudent/ideas/tes/>

³ http://www.sd68.bc.ca/edocuments/SD68News/publications_/spcedstaff3/content.htm

⁴ http://www.sd68.bc.ca/edocuments/SD68News/publications_/specialeducatio/content.htm

interest in supporting specific teaching roles, and the BCTF's interest in trying a new and collaborative approach to professional development.

And so it began....

Getting started

The school district and the NDTA discussed and agreed to provide support by offering one-and-a-half days of release time for project participants to allow for three meetings in school time, with another three meetings held after school with dinners provided. This enabled groups of teachers and administrators to meet six times over the school year for mentoring/professional discussions. This report documents the group's process, progress, and outcomes.

A steering committee was struck, consisting of Charlie Naylor of the BCTF, Michele Bebault, NDTA PD chairperson, Micheline Cawley, Principal of Student Support Services, Bob Eslinger, Vice Principal of Student Support Services, and Lois Gair and Kirstin Funke-Robinson, Co-chairs of the local Special Education Association.

The steering committee brought forward names of individuals as possible facilitators for the groups. Each project group was assigned two co-facilitators. Tricia McKay and Maureen Hancock, both currently Specialist Support Teachers, agreed to take on this task for the Mentoring Learning Assistance Teachers group. A joint meeting was held in October 2004 with the steering committee and facilitators, to explain the project and provide direction. The opportunity to participate in the groups was promoted by both the NDTA and School District 68. Interested teachers were asked to fill out and return an application form stating their teacher role and the group they were applying for. A brief statement as to why it was of interest to them was also required. Response was slow and the deadline of October 18, 2004 had to be extended. By the end of October we had sufficient interest and commitment to get underway.

The group

From the use of the word "mentoring" in our project name, we expected to be providing support and perhaps facilitating professional growth. However, the composition of our group was such that we had more potential mentors than mentees. In our group there were four very experienced Learning Assistance (LA) teachers (one at the secondary level), one very experienced Specialist Support Teacher, now specializing in English as a Second Dialect (ESD), two teachers fairly new to ESD, and two teachers new to Learning Assistance. This made a total of 11 participants, including ourselves. Their reasons for participating ranged from concern over the apparent disintegration of district services due to reduced funding, to the general state of chaos in their jobs, to curiosity about how other people were carrying out their roles. All members shared a genuine concern for the students in their schools.

The experience

The group met six times between November 2004 and the end of February 2005. As mentioned above, we held three dinner meetings and three meetings where release time was provided. The group chose to hold the six meetings over a four-month period in an effort to create a sense of continuity. Meetings were held at the NDTA office and at Cilaire Elementary School. In addition, the steering committee met on a number of occasions to provide direction and support. Release time was provided for facilitators to meet for planning purposes.

The initial meeting of the Mentoring Learning Assistance Teachers group provided the opportunity for participants to get acquainted and learn about the project. It also allowed everyone to vent their frustration and put concerns on the table, leaving the way clear to engage in constructive conversations. From this experience we were able to prioritize topics for discussion and establish general directions for future meetings. After each meeting the next agenda was set, but always remained flexible so we could accommodate the needs and interests of the group. At times, participants were asked to bring in samples of resources or documents from their schools, or examples of practices to be shared. Guest speakers were invited, contributing valuable information and responding to questions of the group.

The following sections reflect the group's direction and focus as we moved through this experience. It includes a series of recommendations we believe are worthy of further discussion, and participants' reflections on their experiences in the project.

Our findings

1. What is a Learning Assistance Teacher?

Defining the role of the Learning Assistance Teacher led to a realization that this position no longer exists as it originally did. This person is now often responsible for a wide range of duties, including:

- ESL and ESD
- integration of low-incidence students (program development)
- Learning Assistance, direct service to students requiring extra support (pull-out and in class)
- School-Based Team chair
- Gifted/Enriched
- assessment
- Resource room

The group agreed that the title "School Support Teacher" (SST) is more appropriate, and encompasses a wider range of potential duties. It was noted that as this change in title was attempted some years ago at the district level but did not catch on, it is timely to try it again.

Changing the title, however, does not bring further clarity to the roles and responsibilities of the job. After discussion, it became clear that the responsibilities of the SST are specific to each school and vary radically. Learning Assistance remains one of the major parts of the SST's job.

2. How can the job be given parameters?

Last year Bob Eslinger, Vice Principal of Student Support Services, created a checklist called “Year at a Glance.” The intent of this checklist was to guide the SSTs through the year, listing various duties and deadlines. This seemed a logical starting point for defining the role of the School Support Teacher. The group spent considerable time going through this list of duties and adding other important tasks to appropriate timelines and places in the school year. In the end, we had a very comprehensive list of responsibilities and a timeline for the school year.

3. How can the School-Based Team help?

A School-Based Team is an “on-site problem-solving group.” One of its main purposes is to co-ordinate school-based services for students. Using the comprehensive “Year at a Glance,” a School-Based Team can document early in September the duties to be executed by various support people for that year. In many cases, most of these duties will become the responsibility of the School Support Teacher (SST). Once this is done, the SST can begin to outline what their position will look like for that year.

The importance of a well-functioning School-Based Team in a school cannot be overstated. The collaboration of school personnel’s insights and the wide range of experience is a valuable resource when trying to meet the needs of our diverse learners. The group spent time discussing some of the key elements of running a School-Based-Team meeting and recording minutes and action plans resulting from the meetings.

4. When do we start seeing students?

Having outlined the responsibilities of the SST it then becomes possible to begin organizing time and scheduling. One of the big topics of discussion was “When do we start seeing students?” There was much frustration and pressure felt by teachers who are trying to provide direct service to students as they always have. Teachers want support. Students need help. But the role of the SST is no longer just to provide learning assistance. Before direct service can occur, Ministry requirements for low incidence designated students must be fulfilled. Designation packages for new or changed high- and low-incidence designations must be completed. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) must be reviewed and developed in the case of new designations. This means scheduling meetings and writing IEPs.

Depending on the demographics of a school, this may be a lengthy process. Direct service to students may not begin until the district duties outlined for start up on the year-at-a-glance checklist have been completed, which could be late in the first term. This becomes an issue for School Support Teachers, who may need to advocate for them selves on occasion, deflecting unreasonable pressure from colleagues who may not yet know of the changes to Support Teacher roles, and who may expect quicker provision of services to students.

In addition, it is important that Support Teachers include in their schedules time for assessment and consultation. Assessment is a critical component of correctly addressing student needs. Consultation with teachers, parents, and Education Assistants is a growing need as we continue in our attempt to teach to diversity.

School Support Teachers (SSTs) who manage IEPs for low-incidence students are also responsible for facilitating the integration of these students into the classroom. It takes

time each week to work collaboratively with teachers and Education Assistants as they work toward meeting the needs of these special learners.

Throughout the year the “Year-at-a-Glance” document will guide the focus of the SST. Toward the end of May and the beginning of June, staff must revisit IEPs with the input of parents. In addition, students’ files are reviewed and narrative summaries are updated.

5. What about the paperwork?

One of the district’s initiatives is to reduce the demands of paperwork. When we looked at streamlining paperwork, group members brought in a wide range of forms used at their schools. District referral and ministry designation forms were not discussed, but their availability on the district Student Support Services web site⁵ was noted. There was formal and informal discussion about the pros and cons of these samples and it was soon apparent that forms reflect the needs and culture of individual schools. There was a need for student support personnel to have the liberty to modify or create documents to meet their specific needs. Below is a list of areas that represent the range of forms currently in use in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District.

- Referral for LA support.
- Referral to School-Based Team.
- Letter to parents re. child receiving LA
- Assessment data collection.
- List of adaptations/learning plan.
- Statement of modifications/signature page for non-designated students.
- Parent contact form.

6. Can web sites help?

As mentioned, all district-level forms are available on the newly-developed Student Support Services web site. This web site was developed in response to the recommendations listed in the independent review of Student Support Services in the school district. As we worked through our various discussions we often referred to this valuable site, to get information or to download examples. We encouraged our group members to gain access to this private site and spend some time exploring its many useful elements. In addition, we discussed the newly-established BCTF web site called *Teaching to Diversity*.⁶

Group members enjoyed the opportunity to work with these two web sites during our last meeting. It is noteworthy that accessing the SD 68 SSS web site can be awkward. Efforts are being made to create a more efficient link for School Support Teachers.

7. What about assessment?

As with forms and referrals, a wide range of testing and screening tools is currently in use in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith school district. People have their favourites, but at the same time are on the lookout for something better, newer, or more efficient. The debate over which assessment tool is better, the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT)⁷ or the Woodcock-Johnson, rages on. The choice at the school level hinges on the preference

⁵ <http://www.sd68.bc.ca/SSS/sssintro.html>

⁶ <http://www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/>

⁷ <http://www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/glossary.html> - W

of the school psychologist. Ideally, SSTs can assist school psychologists by administering these academic assessments, allowing these much-needed professionals to make good use of their time. At the secondary level there is a problem for the SST to find time for assessment, as they experience continuous student contact. There is a need for some scheduled flex time or time scheduled for assessment. With scheduled time for assessment, and the support of school administration to purchase the appropriate assessment tool, SSTs can become familiar with the delivery of the assessment. It is important to note also that the value of B-level assessment tools is not limited to the school psychologist. A complete standardized academic assessment can be very helpful to school staff as they track a struggling student over time.

Overall, the group felt that in-service opportunities with testing and assessment would be very valuable and perhaps move the district closer to using a standard list of tests and screens. The group saw value in consistency with assessment when students move from school to school within the district.

8. Where do we go from here?

Throughout our discussions, differences and similarities between elementary and secondary school support were apparent. At the elementary level, classroom teachers and School Support Teachers deal with all types of learners. At the secondary level there are specialty classes like Junior and Senior Resource Room, Life Skills, and Alternate programs. The Learning Assistance teacher must manage larger groups with less assistance, and is often responsible for ESL and ESD. In general, however, the various roles in school support tend to be shared by a number of specialist teachers.

The recommendations stated below are intended to include both elementary and secondary schools.

1. In early September, provide release-time for School Support Teachers to have a full day in-service focussing on the Year-at-a-Glance document and the School Support Teacher's handbook.
2. Provide release-time on a regular basis, (1/2 day per month) to allow School Support Teachers to meet for the purpose of creating consistency in the practice of :
 - School-Based Team chair
 - testing and assessment
 - resources
 - reporting
 - writing a narrative summary
 - managing blue files
 - working with EAs
 - using SD#68 SSS web site
 - using the BCTF Teaching to Diversity web site
3. Establish mentoring connections for teachers new to school support role.

4. Create a comprehensive handbook for School Support Teachers to include:
 - Year-at-a-Glance⁸
 - document on School-Based Team
 - list of important contacts
 - sample documents and referrals
 - list of assessment tools and screeners
5. Establish a minimum 0.5 or 1.0 FTE position at all schools for a School Support Teacher. This would eliminate some of the fracturing of positions that is currently practiced, e.g., 0.6 LA, 0.05 ESD/ESL, 0.2 Grade 6 classroom, and 0.15 Library.
6. Establish a position in each school for a “School Support Person.” This person would be compensated in the same way a Department Head at the secondary level currently is. Duties would include:
 - SBT chair
 - Co-ordinate the various parts of the school support in school, ESL/ESD, Gifted/Enriched, Learning Assistance, designation process, integration of low-incidence students, etc.

9. Reflections on the mentoring/professional conversation groups

This section documents feedback from teachers concerning their participation in the mentoring/professional conversation groups. We asked each person to offer reflections on their participation by continuing the statement “*This experience has been...*”:

- a great opportunity for professional development which was specific to teachers providing student support services in schools.
- positive, in that it provided concrete framework for our school year.
- an acknowledgment of: a) how our mode of services being provided has changed. b) School Support Teachers; besides doing learning assistance, are responsible for developing IEPs, collaboration with teachers / Education Assistants (EAs), providing resources, assessment and integrating special needs.
- a wonderful, collegial experience.
- enlightening regarding the diversity of support positions in this district. The magnitude of the role change for the learning assistance teacher in the past few years became more apparent. It also became clear that one of the most effective ways to provide professional development is by teachers helping and sharing with other teachers. Teachers know what they need and are well able to help meet those needs for their colleagues.
- an eye opener for a novice! I had *no idea* of the amount of paperwork required. I have been a classroom teacher in the district for 15 years.
- an opportunity to network with School Support Teachers in the district which I feel is vital to successfully doing the job.

⁸ <http://www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/BC-projects/YearAtAGlance/nanaimo.pdf>

- stressful (initially) in that I felt overwhelmed by all there was to do in the job, but then calming in that it focussed me and gave me a clear outline as to the job expectations.
- extremely worthwhile, and I see it as the beginning of my own ongoing professional development re. serving my school effectively in the role of a School Support Teacher (SST).
- both insightful and frustrating in terms of dealing with new realities while sensing one is “re-inventing the wheel.”
- very helpful, practical, useful, positive.
- collaborative (I feel I have people I can contact), necessary! (I don’t know if I would have survived), supportive, efficient (excellent use of time and money), just the beginning, I will remain involved in the project as long as it continues.
- invaluable for a number of reasons... Firstly, it helped the participants to outline their frustrations and share a variety of challenges particular to their job/school. Secondly, it enabled participants to clearly articulate / outline: 1. What the “job” used to look like. 2. What it currently looks like. 3. What it should look like once carefully-thought-through suggestions, tailoring, streamlining, delegating, and redefining take place. Lastly, it gave us a map of where we should look for the next school year to make this job once again a job we can feel good about, and a clear focus to developing programs, delivering services to students that we feel are positive, helpful, worthwhile. In particular, it helped us to clearly articulate and redefine the role to make it one that meets the newer streamlined system we are expected to work within. We also looked to streamlining the enormous paperwork load that seems to have mushroomed in the past few years.
- invigorating and inspiring. After the initial dumping of frustration and the sense of being overwhelmed, we were able to look objectively at the role of the School Support Teacher. We gave it parameters, then looked at the various components of the job with the intent of creating consistency and best practice.